

Kant's Ambivalence on Reflexive Moral Knowledge

Area I: Modern

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*Les vertus se perdent dans l'intérêt,
comme les fleuves se perdent dans la mer.*

– La Rochefoucauld, Maxime #171

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Do beings like us *ever* act from motives that include among them clearly a *good will* in Kant's sense of that notion? Or again, among the incentives operating in morally relevant behavior is there *ever* one we can identify as *respect for the moral law*? Kant himself seems ambivalent on the answer to this question, a fact that seems to have received little attention. In this paper I will not answer this question with a flat 'no' but I hope to make it exceedingly difficult to answer 'yes' if we understand the ideas the way Kant did. Somebody will perhaps see in the obstacles I raise an argument against the significance of 'good will' or 'respect for the moral law', – be that as it may, it is not my purpose to criticize Kant so much as it is to explain his ambivalence. I want to stress that to someone who shares Kant's views of morality in any degree there *is* something to be ambivalent about.

For Kant, a will is good to the extent it is determined by the moral law and in human beings this determination is effected by a moral incentive he calls *respect for the moral law*. Acts done from respect for the moral law are morally worthy. Respect is a feeling, not an idea (like the moral law itself), and like all feelings it is involuntary,¹ but it is the particular feeling elicited from us by conscious recognition of the moral law. We may choose to act *according* to the moral law (in one comparatively unproblematic sense of freedom), but we do not choose to act *from* respect for the moral law; that would involve the feeling of respect which is not ours to feel at will (nevertheless, only such an act as this is truly a *free* act in a manifestly more curious sense of freedom). The feeling of respect follows from the moral law a priori; *qua* feeling it is sensuous, but *qua* moral feeling it is not derived from sensuous experience, its source lies outside experience in the idea (the moral law) which is necessary and univer-

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sal. Kant marvels at this feeling:

In the boundless esteem for the pure moral law,... there is something so singular that we cannot [but] wonder at finding this influence of a merely intellectual idea on feeling to be inexplicable to speculative reason, and at having to be satisfied with being able to see a priori that such a feeling is inseparably bound with the idea of the moral law in every finite rational being.²

Without too much irony, I find the feeling in question even more marvelous and ‘singular’ than Kant finds it. I am keenly aware of a certain disconsolateness in his phrasing; i.e., ‘at having to be satisfied’ with an a priori connection between the feeling and the idea as though some other connection that would make us happier had been excluded absolutely. This is not an isolated instance; there are scattered in many places similar hints of an uneasiness with the way the relation of the feeling and idea *has* to be stated. I bring this up here because I feel Kant was at times aware, perhaps only vaguely, of more than he ever said clearly on the subject of this paper. But I shall concentrate for the most part on a problem that can be generated from what he stated unequivocally.

He attaches great importance to the feeling of respect. It is the only incentive in the moral sphere. Its counterpart in a morally neutral sphere is self-love, generally, or more specifically, sentiments like benevolence, pity or sympathy, for instance (to mention only those we might easily confuse as moral). Presumably there is no third category: there is the moral feeling on the one hand, and all the others – all traceable to self-love – on the other. Feelings of the latter sort do nothing to enhance our moral worth, though some may of course be conducive to moral behavior. The crucial emphasis is on something internal and no part of an observable act or event. The fact that an act is in accordance with the moral law (or a moral maxim) certainly plays a role if not the essential role in our judgements as external observers as to whether an act is good or not. But *our* judgement, which

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can only be based on the empirical, does not confer moral worth. If it is *really* good, it is good as the result of something that happens in the agent. As external observers we are barred from ever divining the true moral quality of an act. That leaves us with ourselves as the only agents we are in a position to judge morally in this absolute sense. What I shall question is if even this is true by asking how it might be done.

Before going further, let me ask at this point, why are we concerned at all about being able to make correct judgements in moral matters? The question is different from the question why we need to make correct judgements of value in assessing human behavior, e.g., the sort of thing that goes on in law courts. Needless to say, there are innumerable practical and pragmatic reasons why. But the only excuse I can give for wanting to know something of my own moral worth is not a very good one by Kantian lights. (Reasons for *not* wanting to know are even more obviously related to self-interest.) If this isn't clear I will say more shortly. I worry about myself because I am weak and need the reinforcement, the consolation, of knowing with certainty that I am just so good or just so bad and not worse. I need the feedback, so to speak, but the fact I *need* it to avoid the utter wretchedness of being completely in a limbo of ignorance is precariously close (putting it cautiously) to a manifestation of self-love. Someone may say I can't go around in such a wretched state very long if I want to be in a condition to be a decent sort of fellow and so it is perfectly – morally – justifiable to want to know. Which begs the question why we deem it necessary to be in any special emotional condition prior to moral behavior.

Simple curiosity cannot be discounted as an intellectual virtue, but beyond a certain basic capacity for knowledge of moral maxims can we say it is useful in making us Moral? That is, is some-

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one who is reasonably certain of the moral worth of at least a part of his reasons for acting morally on account of his knowledge advanced relative to someone who is not at all sure of even this? At any rate, I simply want to open the question why we care to know.

That aside for now, Kant believes we can know something of the moral worth of our own actions. The clearest indication of this is in his discussion of the feeling of ‘self-contentment’ which is associated with consciousness of moral striving and emerges from a virtuous disposition. It is a contentment with moral progress (*not* the progress of one’s moral behavior but of the degree to which one is acting from respect for the moral law: the true measure of moral progress). It is a good in itself and never a conscious object of intent or a means to anything; variously described as a “satisfaction with existence”, “an analogue of happiness”, “a consciousness of needing nothing”,³ an indirect enjoyment of freedom;⁴ Kant is careful to say no desire is gratified; it is not the sort of pleasure one would strive to attain. It does not move one to act, does not of itself confer moral worth on an action or person, is clearly not an incentive as is ‘respect’. Indeed, it appears quite gratuitous, an afterthought to the working structure of Kant’s ethics, a concession, perhaps, to what a simple sense of fairness would expect a virtuous person to ~~be~~ [be] rewarded with. It is a “self-esteem combined with humility”,⁵ he says, and again, “a consciousness of an independence from inclinations and circumstances and of the possibility of being sufficient to myself”.⁶ It is possible, it seems to me, that the theoretical character of Kant’s “practical” reason would have held its own just as well if he had avoided mention of self-contentment; why I say this, I hope, will become clear enough. Surely one cannot experience this feeling if one cannot attain to some knowledge of his own moral state. Or if one does experience a similar feeling in the absence of such knowledge, isn’t it

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more likely a conceit of some sort, hence non-moral if not immoral?

The presupposition that we can and do have reflexive moral knowledge is taken for granted by most of Kant’s commentators. His reference to a moral self-contentment in the *Critique of Practical Reason* supports their confidence. And I agree that he does seem to say that and may have had good reasons as well, but I want to point out that he also says some other things difficult to reconcile with the admission of reflexive moral knowledge. And I think the reasons he may have had for saying these last things are still better. In a late article (1794) entitled “The End of All Things” Kant discusses, in passing, the validity of one’s moral judgement of others, suggesting the folly of such judgement, but he adds, “And may it not be perhaps as stupid a self-conceit in this superficial self-knowledge to pass any judgement in his own favor concerning his own moral worth (and deserved fate) as it would be to pass any judgement on others?”⁷ And lest we infer there is a moral self-knowledge that is *not* superficial in the requisite sense consider these other remarks: In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* he says things like, “a man’s maxims, sometimes [but are they ever?] even his own, are not thus observable; consequently the judgement that the agent is an evil [or good] man cannot be made with certainty if grounded on experience.”⁸ The case against third person judgements is simple enough, but why did

he say 'sometimes even his own' instead of 'except his own'? Virtue has an empirical character (of course) which can be assessed through observation of steadfast conformity to moral law; the move to virtuous behavior requires but a "change of practice" to be detectable, not a "change of heart" which is what is called for by virtue in its "intelligible character". He calls it also a "revolution" or a "rebirth".⁹ But only from a divine being's perspective is it a "revolution" in an instant; from our point of view it is "nothing but a never-ending struggle toward the better,...[a] gradual reformation of the propensity to evil,

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the perverted cast of mind."¹⁰

Man cannot attain naturally to assurance concerning such a revolution, however, either by immediate consciousness or through the evidence furnished by the life which he has hitherto led; for the depths of the heart (the subjective first ground of his maxims) are inscrutable to him.¹¹

There is something we do not have access to and something we do about our moral disposition:

Now he can form no certain and definite concept of his real disposition through an immediate consciousness thereof and can only abstract it from the way of life he has actually followed.¹²

What is it we do not have access to? As early as the *Critique of Pure Reason* he says, "The real morality of our actions, their merit or guilt, even that of our own conduct, thus remains entirely hidden from us."¹³ What remains 'entirely hidden from us'? We seem to demand of the concept of morality more than we can see, "that is, than a course of life entirely blameless and as meritorious as one could wish."¹⁴ (That again from *Religion...*) Kant's is not the relatively trite comment that you can't judge a book by its cover but the considerably more perplexing one that you can't judge it by what's inside either. Once more, one's "self-observation" or "inner experience" is not enough to "fathom the depths of his own heart as to obtain,..., quite certain knowledge of the basis of the maxims which he professes, or of their purity and stability."¹⁵ (From *Religion...*)

There is a way of interpreting these remarks that does not close the door completely on reflexive moral knowledge. Suppose we say: although it's true I can't ever be certain my incentive in performing a morally commendable act is totally pure, nevertheless, I feel certain that at least a part is and further that that part would have been sufficient to effect the act in the absence of the other parts or even in the presence of great counter incentives. The subjunctive part of this thought is very dubious and Kant said as much in a number of places. Even if in such conditional situations I do behave as I predict, if there

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is no certainty with respect to the modicum of pure incentive, whatever the co- or counter incentives, it amounts to wishful thinking. For this thought to mean anything it must be possible for me to be certain of a part of my overall incentive, regardless of the moral value or disvalue of the rest or of any wish on my part that it be singly efficacious. Is this possible?

It seems to me that if it were possible to be certain of a part of what moved me to act in a particular way, it would be possible to be certain *in principle* of *all* that moved me. The only way to avoid this conclusion would be to determine that some motives or incentives are in principle undetectable. Parsing my motive into its constituents to identify with certainty a part is a strange operation if I cannot recognize the other parts. Put another way, whatever method I employed to determine with certainty a fraction of the whole should be useful, barring an enlightening explanation, in determining the other fractions: otherwise what makes me so certain of the part I am sure of? Either we have access to our motives or incentives, or we do not, and if we do not, as Kant in these last remarks seems to say, it must be because some or all their parts are inscrutable to us, and if it is only some that are inscrutable to us, how do we know which without knowing something of them all? I make this point merely to show that when Kant says that we can never be *completely* certain of the real moral worth of our acts he can *not* mean we can be certain of a part but not the whole of our motive; he must mean, rather, that we can be certain (as ‘certain’ as we can be about anything empirical) of the legality of our acts, of law [of] what we *do* and its relation to our understanding of what the moral law demands. Being certain of that may make us confident that we have made a good start in a morally commendable direction, but it is not the slightest guarantee – this is the amazing part – that there is even a

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small *real* moral worth in our act. What we have access to is a kind of *apparent* moral worthiness which, looked at more soberly, is nothing other than a hope extracted from our experience (of legality) that a state of affairs, in principle not in our experience, be the case, namely, that real moral worth (whatever it is?) attach to our act and hence to us. We are allowed to have hope concerning our *real* moral worth, Kant admits,¹⁶ but he also seems to suggest that a close look at who or what is so indulgent with us reveals it is we, *ourselves*. As a practical matter the ‘wretchedness’ that may ensue at the serious realization of our epistemological alienation is avoided by human nature, always strongly inclined to see this so obscurely we needn’t end up in “wild despair”.¹⁷

But why does Kant, as I interpret him, have any doubts at all about our capacity for reflexive moral knowledge? I mean, aren’t we sometimes as sure as anything about what moves us to act? With a little thought we can come up with honest reasons why we do just about everything we do, or we can say what feelings we were experiencing as we do or prepare to do something. There is nothing mysterious about what caused me to do a good deed: if asked, I will say, “I felt sorry for him”, or “I thought it was the right thing to do”, or “I was brought up that way, that’s how I respond”, or “I was thinking of the bad consequences for me if I didn’t”, or probably some mixture of these or things like them. Kant never meant to deny we can respond accurately about our feelings and motives. We can be completely certain and justifiably confident in answering as we usually do inquiries into our motives or feelings or attitudes. So why does the claim we can have no reflexive moral knowledge alarm us? (Along these lines there may be a very good argument that we *shouldn’t* be alarmed by this claim: if it’s true so what? – what can we do about it? – but it’s not the argument I am making.)

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Recall: for Kant, an act is morally worthy only to the extent it is performed from the respect engendered in the agent by the conscious recognition of the moral law as represented by the applicable moral maxim.¹⁸ The objective determination of the applicable moral maxim is immaterial for purposes here. I am taking it for

granted there is no problem at that stage. It is the 'subjective first ground of a maxim', the feeling of respect for the moral law which follows supposedly a priori upon its objective apprehension, that I am concerned with. This feeling is the *only* incentive accepted,[;] only acts involving that incentive accrue moral worth,[;] only knowledge of such acts counts as moral knowledge. What stands in the way of our knowing of such acts? The short answer is: try finding one. Kant set up a marvelous array of obstacles for us.

[The argument against the possibility of reflexive moral knowledge...]

Let's begin by enumerating and eliminating whole classes of acts that cannot qualify as morally worthy on the basis of what we can know of them. (Whether they qualify on the basis of something beyond us is necessarily an open question, if not an incomprehensible question.) First, for Kant, all acts stemming from the general incentive of **self-love** are morally neutral. Particular incentives here include things like pity, sympathy or benevolence. One argument (a weak one) against a morality based on such desires or feelings is their contingency; presumably, the capacity for them varies greatly from one individual to another and from one situation to another. Kant's more basic objection is that they do not follow from an exercise of our freedom or what he calls our *personality*.¹⁹ Health, wealth, honor, power, etc., or simply avoidance of pain or pursuit of pleasure, in brief, happiness, lie back of them. Nature provides these goals and their respective promptings: we are led by the nose, so to speak.

Second, all acts done from **habit** are morally neutral; their

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moral worth, if any, is tied to the spirit with which the habit was acquired in the first place. One could even say the inclination to pick up habits (good or bad), because it saves us the pain and trouble of self-struggle each time, is just another case of self-love. In any case, there is something cheap about a good deed done from habit one can scarcely associate with Kant's description of the strenuous moral task.

Third, all acts the result of a remorseful **conscience** are morally neutral. The pain we seek to avoid need not be physical.²⁰

Fourth, all acts done because of an exquisite **supersensible feeling**, something on a higher level than mere sympathy or benevolence, the sudden joy of feeling one with-all-living things or some such divine sentiment, – Kant warns of these quasi-mystical stirrings of the heart: acting at their behest is a perilous undertaking: "man is never more easily deceived than in what promotes his good opinion of himself".²¹ (In this connection, it is difficult not to notice the strained eloquence of inspiration in Kant's own encomiums for such dear notions as duty,²² sincerity,²³ and virtue.²⁴) Each of the last three classes of acts also suffers the same objections as the first group: contingency and the rationally determined will's non-involvement.

(I interject a brief comparison of moral sense theory, versions of which were held by Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Smith, Hume, et al., for symmetry **[sic]** with Kant's theory of moral feelings. The contrast is instructive. It helps bring out what is really at stake here. In Kant's idiom the moral sense theory of, say, Hutcheson places the determination of the will with a special feeling, considered general among us as part of our 'humanity'. It

judges the rightness or wrongness of a behavior, and reason enters the picture logically later in the implementation of such judgement. The *orientation* of the will is determined by this feeling,

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its *movement* is effected by reason. But both feeling and reason have a place: the important distinction is their logical priority. Kant views things conversely. For him, though the will is pathologically *affected*, to be moral it must be rationally *determined*. Without prior reference to any feelings[,] we can perceive by purely intellectual moves what is good and what is evil – the moral law – ; this perception or recognition, as it were, in turn inspires the pure incentive or moral feeling. That this feeling is not the same as that of which the moral sense theorists speak is not relevant here. Again, feeling and thought (passion and reason) *both* are requisite for moral behavior, only the logical priority is reversed. The comparison is made to illustrate this point: in a significant way[,] Kant's ethical view *is* a moral sense theory, a moral feeling just because of its secondary logical sequence is no less an essential part of his view. Now, given this, how is Kant to distance himself from the moral sense theorists, something he must do to avoid his own objections to moral sense theories. I think he was driven to circumscribe a *very* special feeling, one free of human vagary. I am attempting to show there is a price for doing this.)

Suppose we assume that to know there is a degree of moral worth in one's act is to know that at least a part of the (unchosen) subjective first ground of our (chosen) maxim is not selfish, not captured by the label 'self-love' in all its devious guises. Are we in a better position to determine the good there is in what moves us to act by separating out all that is not good? Surely I know (or can know) when I am being selfish. Well, ordinarily, yes. If by the term 'selfish' we have in mind cases of indisputably blatant [sic] self-interest: material greed, self-aggrandizement, etc. We reserve the term for people who appropriate things of human value (objects or pleasure) beyond what we consider decent or what they have a right to. We don't call people

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who breathe air selfish (save in very uncommon (as yet) circumstances). We might use the term with special vehemence when it's at our expense that he appropriates, but this isn't necessary. When I spare a panhandler a coin because I feel sorry for his condition I am not called selfish. When I strive to be especially kind to someone I've treated poorly in the past because now I feel badly about it I am not called selfish. Or when I find myself being considerate of others on account of a subjectively certain but difficult to explain spiritual kinship I feel with my fellow human beings, I am not called selfish. But from Kant's (and I daresay not only Kant's) perspective self-interest is at work in all these cases. If we call them cases of selfish behavior let us be clear that we are using 'selfish' in one of its less standard senses. I won't go as far as to call it a technical sense, for it is far from peculiar to Kant or even many philosophers: it has its roots in ordinary usage as Kant incidentally remarks in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (incidentally: because he doesn't take usage to be the arbiter of anything decisive);²⁵ rather, it is that people are engaging in something other than small talk when they invoke *that* use. And the claim that I know very well when I am being selfish is more comfortably made in what I might call the polite forum of the everyday sense of 'selfish'. The question, again, is: how do I know? (Others, of course, may attend more to the pattern of my behavior.) By introspection, – by which is not meant

anything elaborate or arcane. I take Kant to include introspection as a type of empirical observation. At least it is treated as such vis-à-vis rational knowledge.

The implication is not that we don't know when we are being selfish in Kant's sense of the term. We know quite well according to Kant when we are being selfish. All the time. That is, if we don't take too seriously his talk of self-contentment and the presupposed

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reflexive moral knowledge and direct our attention to the acts covered in the extension of the terms, 'selfishness', 'self-interest', or 'self-love', as he uses them. And we know not through introspection or any sort of empirical observation which at best could attest to the legality of our behavior, – we know (if we know anything this way) as a matter of logical elimination (or a priori?). Kant has painted us into a corner. We *know* we are in that corner. Unless there's a secret trap door...

What must **he [be]** the case if we take the talk of self-contentment and its presupposition seriously? Then we have access to reflexive moral knowledge. Consider the possibility that introspection or some peculiar kind of introspection is not an empirical observation, or has a certainty of an entirely different order. Let's call it a special *moral intuition* we possess – not to be confused with the moral sense of the English theorists: this moral intuition does not offer objective information about what is good or bad behavior; it gauges, rather, the proportion of the element of pure moral incentive in the total attitude or incentive we bring to an act, the extent to which it is done from respect for the moral law and, one would think, the extent to which it is not. We, it is assumed, do not need this special moral vision to behave morally, but we certainly need it to *know* that we are *acting* morally. For those who have it[,] the feeling of virtuous accomplishment or selfcontentment is a real possibility. What are we to make of this idea? After all, there is the world of sense and the intelligible world for Kant and we, as beings endowed with 'personality', have dual citizenship. The latter is the higher vocation and it's natural that we should regard it "with reverence and the laws of this vocation with the deepest respect."²⁶ Since we can say we are at the nexus of these two worlds[,] access to each is not implausible...

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But in making this moral vision so special I think he was forced to make it auxiliary and finally, perhaps, to abandon it. Or so one might reconstruct his thinking. Kant, I believe, had too much respect for the integrity of empiricism to insist on the excessively dogmatic claim that this special capacity is universal. And anything less than universal could scarcely be serviceable for an ethics like his. More importantly, the exercise of the special moral intuition does nothing for our rational autonomy, of itself it adds not a morsel of moral worth. Not only is it not needed theoretically[,] but[,] in practice[,] any positive value it may have in the direction of encouraging moral progress is at least balanced, if not overwhelmed, by its liabilities. Not having Freud at hand but being an admirer of the great seventeenth century French moralist and wit, La Rochefoucauld, whom he quoted with approval more than once, Kant might have thought,

There are diverse types of curiosity: that of self-interest, which moves us to want to know that which would be of use; and that of conceit which stems from the desire to know what others don't.²⁷

Ideally, reflexive moral knowledge [if it exists] shouldn't appear to us as useful. If it **does** [appears to], something is very likely wrong. And if it's not (morally) useful it can have but an aesthetic or intellectual interest and these, no less because of their refined or hermetic character, are from the moralist's perspective of a kind with the more obviously brutish pleasures.²⁸

If Kant did in fact mean to insist on such a capacity for reflexive moral knowledge in spite of these considerations, one would think he surely would have noted that the idea needed some clear exposition and some kind of argument for its plausibility, especially in light of his dim view of any peculiar senses, it might be claimed, we possess. And though he may speak not infrequently as though we are to take it for granted, nowhere, I find, does he expound on it or even recognize it

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explicitly.

If not a special sense providing us with immediate reliable data regarding at least a partial specific breakdown of the contents of what moves us to act in morally relevant situations, suppose Kant meant something more informal when he seemed to say we can know that to an extent we can act unselfishly. Let's say I believe with conviction I've acted unselfishly at times in my life. I do not claim any special sense for this knowledge. I am not judging exclusively on the basis of the observable character of my acts, I have soberly assessed my motives and incentives, I am not deceiving myself (I believe). I just feel very sure there has to be a modest element of virtue in me. I admit that if I am deceiving myself on this score, I am not the first person to ask. I grant that even ordinary modesty and humility are suspect, or to quote La Rochefoucauld,

Humility is often but a tender submissiveness which serves us to subdue others; it's an artifice of pride which lowers itself in order to raise itself; and which though it can affect a thousand guises is never better concealed nor more capable of deception than when it wears the face of humility.²⁹

But what gives you [or anyone] the right to infer an 'always' from his 'often'? To flat out and [sic] say virtue is a grand pipe-dream is a response as much open to vanity as its denial. All these things considered and in the full light (or darkness) of my fallibility, nothing; can shake my conviction that virtue is not utterly foreign to me.... So someone may humbly insist.

The ever-present possibility of self-deception no one denies. But there are certain times, perhaps most of the time, possibly even *all* of the time, when nothing tremendously soul-shattering will ensue if we should discover it in ourselves. Upon my recognition of a false self-confession of my attitude toward an important state-of-affairs or a significant person or a dear notion – about whether I am really bitter over something or not, really love someone or not, really be-

lieve in the values I profess – why do I react, if I react at all, in whatever way I do? I am not suggesting suicides never result **[as perhaps they have: Otto Weininger]**: but I think the question can be asked, if we react, if there is not some very potent and indignant vanity at stake. (My use of ‘vanity’ is to correspond with the virtually all-encompassing sense of ‘selfishness’ Kant, as I interpret him, employs.) The love of truthfulness is a very odd thing, and I really don’t know what to say about it, except this: The more important, the more significant, the more cherished, in short, the greater the emotional stake of a feeling, attitude or belief the more honesty with respect to it is demanded – paradoxically, the more distant truthfulness appears. Love of truth is so odd because it is very difficult to find an instance of it that cannot easily be as well love of something else more mundane. ‘Very difficult’ is an understatement – ‘impossible’ is more accurate (for Kant).

But this is an awfully radical inference, is it not? Let’s examine the alternative. There is someone who we know **[who]** *ex hypothesi* is not deceiving himself on one of these critical questions (that it be critical is essential, for if it is not a critical question, self-deception can hardly matter and, for that *very* reason, is not likely or intelligible). A good soul comes to mind like David Hume (*le bon* David) or someone with a notoriety for ingenuousness such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, pick anyone – G. E. Moore will do – just think of the opposite of a Hamlet-type. What must we say then? (I mean, supposing there *are* such people.) The moral psychology of Kant’s ethical philosophy collapses. Easily, those philosophers who don’t pretend to mettle in moral psychology could accept this, but *for Kant* it is serious. Then things like benevolence, human sympathy and pity, love, etc., are the only plausible foundations for a morality. Respect for the moral law is an aberration in the history of human moral thinking: a dire consequence for Kant. But is this a forced

choice? Couldn’t we have it both ways? Couldn’t we take benevolence, sympathy, pity, love, – that entire set of popularly commended sentiments as essential to the *practice* of morality alongside the equally popular sense of duty as the supreme criteria of morality at some non-practical idealistic level? Two things are required for this wonderful confabulation to appear to work: first, that we posit two worlds, the sensuously obvious one and an intellectual one, (perhaps not so obvious but necessitated by the way we think) – which at least**[,]** it is arguable**[,]** Kant in fact did; and second, that we make self-deception in the case of reflexive moral knowledge impossible for the elegant reason that such knowledge is intrinsically (we might say *a priori*) inaccessible to us – which I suggest Kant may also have done. **[The justification for Kant’s dualism is being indicated here. It is, for him, a moral *sine qua non*. This, we think, morally necessitates his dualism. This need, given our moral psychology, is more convincing than any purely metaphysical argument. In sum, dualism enables the mere possibility of a Kantian ethics. About more than that, we are left in the dark.]**

There arises the question whence we derive the notion of a *real* moral worth over and above the apparent moral worth (open for anyone to see) if to that ‘real moral worth’ we can never have access. Kant *may* have answered the question in two ways. He talks of vain wishes in the *Critique of Judgement*, discussing how our wishes even when we are “assured of the inadequacy of our faculties to produce an object” are not thereby discouraged or quashed. He speculates nature allows us to wish even for the impossible so as not to leave our faculties a dearth of challenge. He calls it “a benevolent ordinance in our nature”.³⁰ This is Kant, the obliging empirical

psychologist. Then there is also a more characteristic Kant who says “morality leads inevitably to religion”³¹ and so room for the idea of *grace* is made,³² but that is a whole other subject.

One last aside. The corrosive dialectic afflicting a claim to moral worth or genuine virtue will spare no less a self-judgement of wickedness or moral turpitude. If it is true we cannot know the moral value of an act, its moral disvalue is likewise undiscoverable. It appears possible that an agent with the loftiest motive (in his own honest judgement)

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should in truth be mocking morality, and someone with admittedly the most selfish of motives (the judgement, again, his own) should in reality be pleasing to the eye of a morally omniscient being. Nevermind [sic] the offence to our sense [of] decency or fairness[, which], itself, [is] morally suspect as I’ve been insinuating in the course of this attempt to penetrate Kant’s ambivalence on the subject of reflexive moral knowledge.

Despite the initial presumptuousness of my claim it should be clear, if I have expressed my concerns well, that I have not touched critically the theoretical apparatus of Kant’s ethics. He believed legality (morally correct behavior) from self-interest (any motive however indirectly or surreptitiously conducive to our happiness) could not comprise the whole of practical ethics. He thought the essence of *real* morality involved something else besides. Call it respect or reverence for the moral law, or duty, or true virtue, or whatever. There is nothing practically implausible about this to me until I ask the question: what do I have to do according to Kant to be moral? (If Kant’s theory is one of meta-ethics this question is disallowed, but I don’t think Kant would have made much of the distinction between ethics and meta-ethics. He says too many things that have no business in a meta-ethics.) That the task is immensely difficult and demands great striving I am not surprized [sic] to hear. That the task is ‘impossible’ in the strongest sense of that word comes as more striking news (but perhaps not *that* striking). Kant didn’t say ‘...impossible...’ in so many words, though I believe he was disturbed by the thought. **[No logical law would be violated if, in the history of the species, a person on an occasion was precisely motivated, as Kant prescribed, as necessary for a moral act to occur.]** In the sense of ‘act’ consistent with freedom, for me to *act* morally it must not only be possible for an act to *be* moral, it must also be possible for me to *know* that it is. Assuming nothing prevents the first condition (not a small assumption), how can I be sure the second holds? Why the notion of a special sense for discriminating the moral quality of an act, at least as infallible as our ordinary senses,

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presented difficulties for Kant, I have tried to show. Why the ordinary capacity we have for introspecting the selfishness or unselfishness of our actions is of no use here, I hope is more obvious. Why we have every imaginable motive to think we *do* have access to such knowledge is perhaps the most obvious point of all. Kant may not have been quite ready to be as generous in his assessment of basic human sentiments as were, say, Hume or Rousseau – each in his way – , but neither it seems was he overly eager to paraphrase La Rochefoucauld and admit, “When vanity isn’t speaking, what is there to say?”³³

NOTES

1. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, (Beck trans.) p. 82-3.
2. Ibid., p. 82, see also Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, (Beck trans.) pp. 10-11.
3. Ibid., p. 122.
4. Ibid., p. 123.
5. Ibid., p. 133.
6. Ibid., p. 165.
7. Kant, *On History*, edited. by L. W. Beck, p. 72.
8. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, (Greene and Hudson trans.) p. 16.
9. Ibid., p. 42-43.
10. Ibid., p. 43.
11. Ibid., p. 46.
12. Ibid., p. 71.
13. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (Kemp Smith trans.) p. 475.
14. Kant, *Religion...*, p.56.
15. Ibid., p. 57.
16. Ibid., p. 62.
17. Ibid., p. 66, see also Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 90-1.
18. The maxim must 1) be universalizable and 2) of such character that the agent could *will* that maxim universal.
19. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 89-90.
20. Kant , *Preface to the Metaphysical Elements of Ethics*, (T. K. Abbott trans.) p. 304.
21. Kant, *Religion...*, pp. 61-62.
22. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 89.
23. Kant, *Religion...*, p. 178.
24. Kant, *Religion...*, p. 161.

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25. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, especially, pp. 13, 20-2.

26. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 90.

27. «Il y a diverses sortes de curiosité: l'une d'intérêt, qui nous porte a désirer d'apprendre ce qui nous peut être utile; et l'autre d'orgueil, qui vient du désir de savoir ce que les autres ignorent.» Maxime #173, from La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, Nouveaux Classiques Larousse. (My trans.)

28. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 21-2.

29. «L'humilité n'est souvent qu'une feinte soumission, dont on se sert pour soumettre les autres; c'est un artifice de l'orgueil qui s'abaisse pour s'élever; et bien qu'il se transforme en mille manières, il n'est jamais mieux déguisé et plus capable de tromper que lorsqu'il se cache sous la figure de l'humilité.» Maxim #254, op. cit. (My trans.) On the same point see also Maxims #200 and #388. #200: 'Virtue wouldn't venture so far if vanity didn't tag along.'

30. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, (Bernard trans.) part III of Introduction, p. 14.

31. Kant, *Religion...*, p. 7.

32. Ibid., pp. 41, 47-55, 70.

33. A paraphrase of Maxims #137 and #138, «On parle peu, quand la vanité ne fait pas parler.» and «On aime mieux dire du mal de soi-même que de n'en point parler.»